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Full-page illustration



THE FAIRY OF THE DESERT.

[Frontispiece.]

CROCKER THE CLOWN.

A TALE FOR BOYS.

BY

BENJAMIN CLARKE.

(EDITOR OF "KIND WORDS.")



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CROCKER THE CLOWN.



CHAPTER I.

ARRIVAL OF THE CIRCUS.

GREAT WORLEY was all astir. That is to say, all the boys and girls of the town were, and many of the grown-up persons, who openly shared in the excitement, besides some who were really much interested in what was about to happen, but did not like to confess it.

The fact was that JAMESON'S GRAND AMERICAN CIRCUS was coming into the town that day to perform.

Now Great Worley was a very quiet sort of a place. It was not the county town, and had not the assizes to enliven it ; it did not possess a Literary Institution, or Mechanics' Institute, or Young Men's Association, or anything of that sort. It had no good lecture-room, so that lectures, concerts, and entertainments that

would otherwise have been given there, were reserved for the neighbouring towns, some of which were smaller, but afforded better accommodation for large audiences.

There was only the large market-room at the "Ring of Bells"—where the farmers dined together at an ordinary—that would accommodate more than a hundred people, so that proprietors of exhibitions, who required a large number to make it worth their while to visit the town, were deterred from doing so. For the "Ring of Bells" was not the first inn in the town by a long way; and, except on market days, respectable people were shy of entering it. Now and then, perhaps, some wizard, or performer with tame birds or trained dogs and monkeys, would exhibit at the inn; and young people would be induced to go, when probably they would be made familiar with sights and sounds to which it were far better they should remain strangers.

But now a first-rate circus was announced; and the folks not caring to inquire what had drawn it out of the beaten track, and visit Great Worley instead of Slingford, were pre-

pared to welcome it with open arms and pockets. For some days juvenile curiosity had been raised to its highest pitch by the large coloured posters, and by the smaller shop-window bills, which gave a most graphic idea of the nature of the performances, in which men, women, and children, horses and ponies, were to take part. At first, the mere display of the strength of the company, as represented in the gorgeous bills of the procession, was sufficient to send the youngsters into ecstasies; but when, on a closer inspection of the shop-window bills, they got some idea of what was promised in the entertainment, their delight and impatience could scarce be kept within bounds. With what firm faith they believed in all that was held forth on those bills; how readily they gave the performers credit for being able to put themselves into the most perilous situations and the most impossible attitudes; how eagerly they practised as many of the feats as their untrained bodies would allow, need not now be determined. Suffice it to say that the morning of the day that was to witness this great event

in the history of Great Worley, was most eagerly anticipated.

A few of the more adventurous boys had gone out some distance on the road to Chilkham, where the circus had performed on the day previously, in order to see as much as possible in advance, and accompany some of the carriages into the town; whilst others had got up early, and were in the field where the tent was to be pitched, watching the first arrivals and preparations. It might not seem an interesting matter to look on at a number of men pulling about coils of rope, tugging at a mass of canvas, and driving into the ground pegs of larger or smaller dimensions, but to the boys it was a source of great enjoyment, both to those who hoped to be covered by that canvas by-and-by, and to those who had no such expectations.

The school-boys who had witnessed these preliminaries, when they got to school, were surrounded by interested groups of their companions, as they related all they had seen; what they had overheard some of the men saying to one another; how Sambo, a great

burly black man, wielded the heavy iron hammer with immense force, as he drove the larger pegs into the ground, to which were to be attached the supports for the centre pole.

The boys who went to no school, together with the idle lads and men of the town, were in the field all the morning, witnessing the arrival of the company by detachments.

I fear the masters and mistresses had a trying time of it that morning, especially those whose school-rooms faced the street through which the circus had to pass on its way to the field.

At least Mr. Boston had, who kept the Grammar School in the High Street. He had determined to give his boys a half-holiday, as he knew many would be taken by their parents to the circus in the afternoon, and he thought it only fair that those who did not go should at least have the holiday. He had also arranged to close at twelve, that all might see the procession, so that his boys saw the force of his request that their studies, up to that hour, might be interfered with as little as possible. Still, thoughts of the coming performance

would intrude themselves ; and it seemed to Charlie Earnest most natural, when his class was called up to its lesson on the terrestrial globe, that he should inform Mr. Boston that " Herr Tomblor was to balance a globe, quite as big as the one before them, on his feet, besides catching it when thrown into the air, and ever so much more."

All things considered, the morning passed off very well, for Mr. Boston was a judicious man. He always had his pupils well in hand ; aye, better than the driver of the twenty cream-coloured horses would have his, by-and-by, though by no means such a numerous or so spirited a team. Yet there was not a boy who did not like him, except, perhaps, the very lazy ones, who did not care for work, and who therefore thought him harsh and cruel in not leaving them to their own indolent ways. As an instance of his thoughtfulness, he had told all the boarders to communicate with their parents, and ascertain their views about the forthcoming circus, for he determined that no boy should go without the consent of his father or mother.

Most of them had written to their mothers : some, as a matter of course, for it was with them they always corresponded ; others because they thought the consent of their mothers would be the more easily obtained ; but others, again, because something else was necessary to be obtained besides permission to go, and that was money to pay for the admission. For it must be known that it was now near the end of the half, and very little pocket-money was in hand, except in the case of those who were of a more mercantile turn of mind, and had laid out their cash in profitable investments of an eatable nature, which they had retailed to their less speculative school-fellows at enormous profits.

Were I writing a history of Great Worley Grammar School, I might relate the desperate efforts which some of the boys made to supply themselves with entrance money ; how some sold their books and other presents at a ruinous sacrifice ; how others pledged their credit for the next half year, and borrowed money at a most exorbitant rate of interest.

About all this, however, Mr. Boston, of

course, knew nothing. It was enough for him that a boy had permission from home, and could pay his way.

Mr. Boston had said but little about the circus, and it was not known whether he would accompany the boys or not.

Just before twelve o'clock, when the school was ready to be dismissed, he called attention, and said—

“You know I have made arrangements for those who have permission to go to the circus, and for all of you to have a half-holiday. Mr. Knyves will go with the boarders this evening, but Mrs. Boston and I have planned a little entertainment of our own, to which we invite the boarders who may be at home, and all the day scholars who may prefer to come here, or whose parents may not allow them to attend the circus. I need say no more now, except that whilst I shall try and interest my young friends, I shall not try to compete with the horsemanship. I hope, nevertheless, we shall manage to spend a very pleasant evening.”

This little speech elicited loud cheers and expressions of approval from all the boys: every

one felt pleased that there was to be something for those who should stay at home ; and never was a happier group dismissed from school—except, of course, at the “breakings up”—than the boys of this school on this eventful morning.

CHAPTER II.

THE PROCESSION ROUND THE TOWN.

IT was nearly half-past twelve before the sound of the drum indicated that the procession had left the field, and was on its way round the town. The circuit it would take would be small, as Great Worley had but few streets; and it was rightly judged by many, that those who stood at the corner of East Street, in the High Street, would see it on its way to the top of the latter, and again as it turned from it to go through the former. Accordingly, at this point a number of people posted themselves, and amongst them several of the boys from the Grammar School. There was no occasion for any of the lads of the town to perch themselves on the ladder-bar of the lamp-post, but boys always like to elevate themselves when sight-seeing, and consider they have an advantage over others when thus raised. All the tradesmen were at their doors, with their assis-

tants, whilst the upper windows were filled with their families and friends, who had come in from the country to make a day of it. The sound of the band drew nearer and nearer, until at last one of the boys declared it was "Annie Laurie" they were playing, and just then the leading horses of the band-carriage were descried turning into the High Street from the London Road.

A few faint cheers were raised, but there was too much to notice and admire to allow of that. First came the band-carriage in the form of a nautilus shell, drawn, as had been announced, by twenty cream-coloured horses. Some of the more active-minded men might be heard counting aloud, "Two, vower, sex," &c., until the whole number was told off, when one man communicated the result in a still louder key, "Es, there's twenty on 'em, sure 'nuff; well, now, that bates anything I've seen in Gurt Worley; and I've seen a tidy many things in my day."

"Ah!" said one of the farmer's men, "that chap's got 'is'n work to do as drives 'em; they won't take he up fer driving wi'out reins, I